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SUBJECT: ERBIL RRT: STANDING ROOM ONLY AUDIENCES FOR U.S. ELECTION EXPERT

This is an Erbil Regional Reconstruction Team (RRT) reporting cable.

Summary

¶1. With the strong support of Embassy Baghdad's Public Affairs Section, RRT Erbil's Public Diplomacy Section brought University of Massachusetts-Amherst Professor Mike Hannahan to the Kurdistan Region October 26-November 7 for a series of lectures at major universities. Hannahan, the Director of the Civic Initiative program at U-Mass, is an expert on American elections and focused his talks on the U.S. presidential election. Hannahan spoke to more than 1,100 people at major universities in Dohuk, Erbil, and Sulaimaniyah. He moderated a video teleconference (VTC) on the eve of the U.S. elections between students at University of Kurdistan-Hawler and his own students at U-Mass. Hannahan delivered the keynote remarks at RRT Erbil's election night event, carried live by Zagros TV, and also met with the Kurdistan Regional Government's Minister for Higher Education. The success of Professor Hannahan's program demonstrates that American academics can and should come to northern Iraq for extended periods for the purpose of building stronger ties between Iraqi and American institutions. End Summary.

Lectures at Dohuk University...

¶13. Professor Hannahan's first stop was Dohuk University, which routinely hosts visiting faculty members from European universities and whose leadership has frequently asked for USG support in bringing U.S. academics to the school. Hannahan gave two lectures at the university about the U.S. presidential election: a lengthy talk to more than 100 students from the colleges of law and arts and a smaller session with about 50 faculty members. The lectures were so well-received that the Dohuk provincial government asked Hannahan to deliver an unscheduled third lecture to an enthusiastic audience of approximately 120 leading local politicians from all the province's major parties. Dohuk University President Dr. Asmat Khalid told RRT PD officers that Hannahan's visit was "exactly" what he "had been hoping for," noting that he believed it was a historic first step in building a strong relationship between Dohuk University and U-Mass.

...Sulaimaniyah University...

¶14. Hannahan then traveled to the Sulaimaniyah University, where he delivered two lectures. The first was a lengthy presentation and Q&A session with approximately 160 students from the political science department and the law college, many of whom stood or sat in the aisles once the auditorium's seats were filled. As in Dohuk, Hannahan also held a small seminar on the election with a group of about 30 faculty members and graduate students. Sulaimaniyah University President Dr. Ali Saeed pleaded for more interaction with American academics, stressing to RRT PD officers that such visits were badly needed after the long intellectual isolation of the Ba'athist era. While in Sulaymaniyah, Hannahan also met with the Acting Chancellor of American University in Iraq-Sulaimaniyah (AUI-S) to

discuss future cooperation between U-Mass and AUI-S.

...and a Full Schedule in Erbil

¶ 5. Hannahan capped his visit to the Kurdistan Region with a multi-day stay in Erbil, where he was hosted by the University of Kurdistan-Hawler. In addition to delivering a lecture to more than 200 students, Hannahan hosted a video teleconference (VTC) on November 3 between his students at U-Mass and an audience of about 250 UK-H students, faculty, and officials from the KRG's Ministry of Higher Education. The VTC was a huge hit, receiving significant media coverage both in the Amherst area and in Erbil. A UK-H faculty member told RRT PD officers that the VTC, which was conducted in English, "absolutely electrified" the UK-H students. "I've never seen the students so excited about something," she added. Professor Hannahan also delivered keynote remarks at RRT Erbil's election night event, which was attended by nearly 300 VIPs from throughout the Kurdistan Region and covered live by a major satellite TV network (Zagros).

¶ 6. During his stay in Erbil, Professor Hannahan met with KRG Minister of Higher Education Dr. Idris Salih. Salih accompanied Hannahan to Salahaddin University, where Hannahan delivered a lecture to approximately 200 students and faculty members on the result of the U.S. presidential election and its likely impact on both American domestic and foreign policy.

Logistics Note

¶ 7. Programming Dr. Hannahan was made much easier by the willingness of local Iraqi institutions to take the lead in handling logistics.

He traveled to Erbil via Austrian Airlines and was treated by his host universities like any other foreign visitor. He stayed at hotels in Dohuk and Sulaimaniyah and in a UK-H faculty apartment complex in Erbil. His local transportation and security arrangements were handled entirely by his host institutions. In his out-briefing with RRT PD officers before his departure, Professor Hannahan stressed that he was completely comfortable with the universities taking the lead, noting that the Kurdistan Region is "the safest place I've ever been." What this demonstrates is that the Kurdish region is a safe and desirable destination for USG-funded educational and cultural experts.

Comment: More, Please

¶ 8. Mike Hannahan's host institutions and the KRG Ministry of Higher Education have a simple message for the USG: thank you for making the visit possible and please send more professors! With the full support of KRG Minister of Higher Education Idris Salih, Dohuk University President Asmat Khalid has gone beyond asking for short-term visitors and called for placing a Fulbright scholar at Dohuk University. The school, he emphasized to us, needs U.S. academics to stay on campus for longer periods of time, ideally one semester or even an academic year. Given the success of Professor Hannahan's visit, which proved that the Kurdistan Region's universities are capable of hosting American academics with minimal USG involvement, we would ask that ECA give all due consideration to Dr. Asmat's request. End Comment

¶ 9. RRT Erbil also wishes to acknowledge that Hannahan's visit to the Kurdistan Region would not have been possible without the strong support of Embassy Baghdad's Public Affairs Section, and the Fulbright Program Manager Jay Taylor, in particular.

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